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Women, mining and power in southeastern Democratic Republic of Congo: The case of Kisengo

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ABSTRACT

Recent decades have witnessed a growing scholarly interest in women's involvement in ASM, with many authors drawing attention to two frequently occurring trends: the fact that women move to mining areas to escape oppressive gender rules and norms, and the remarkable efforts of women miners to exercise agency in the typically complex and unstable socio-political environments of artisanal mining sites. An important gap in the existing literature is the lack of attention for the differences in agency and the power relations between these women. This article seeks to fill this gap by presenting an ethnographic case study on the so-called *mamans moutrousses*, a group of women assisting artisanal miners with the drying and cleaning of minerals in coltan mines close to Kisengo, a locality situated in the Congolese Tanganyika province. Drawing inspiration from Vigh's navigation theory, the work of Honwana, and the spatial approach advanced by Watts and Korf, the article argues that the less successful women in Kisengo's mining business have only been able to display 'tactic agency', while the more successful ones have succeeded in demonstrating 'strategic agency'.

1. Introduction

After decades of neglect, women miners finally appear to receive the scholarly attention they deserve. There is by now a substantial body of literature documenting and analyzing the large variety of roles, positions, experiences and perspectives of women taking part in different forms of mining across the globe and in different phases of human history (Lahiri-Dutt and Macintyre, 2006; Gier and Mercier, 2006). There are studies about the personal motives for and the structural causes of female participation in mining and mining-related activities (Yakovleva, 2007; Maclin et al., 2017), the many difficulties, barriers, and forms of discrimination, oppression and inequality women miners are confronted with (Armah et al., 2016; Hilson et al., 2018b), and the remarkable resilience, inventiveness and creativity of women living and working in mining areas (Kelly et al., 2014; Werthmann, 2009). Furthermore, recent years have witnessed growing attention to the disturbingly high levels of sexual and gender-based violence in mining settings (Rustad et al., 2016; Kotsadam et al., 2017), and to the fact that women sometimes play a leading role in expressing the grievances and defending the interests of indigenous communities vis-à-vis large-scale mining corporations (Jenkins, 2015).

In the literature on artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM), the complexity and gendered nature of power relations in mining camps and boomtowns has been highlighted by several scholars. The research of Geenen (2016) in the gold mines of Congo's South Kivu province, though not specifically focused on gender issues, has shown that, contrary to the widespread popular image of artisanal mining areas as places of lawlessness, chaos, criminality, alcohol and drug abuse, the artisanal mining sector is usually surprisingly well organized and governed by a combination of official and unofficial rules, regulations and norms. Interestingly, the rules and norms about gender relations in these places are often in many respects markedly different from those in the outside world. De Boeck, for instance, has noted that women involved in the diamond trade between Angola's Lunda Norte province and the Congolese border towns of Kahemba and Tembo at the end of the 1990s made '*an attempt at adopting and manipulating essentially male strategies, using alliances as a means to create a supporting network for commercial and sometimes also political ends*' (1999: 107). In doing so, they transformed local gender regimes, which is why they were locally referred to as '*dogs breaking their leash*' (ibidem: 93). Bryceson, Jonsson

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and Verbrugge have made similar observations with regard to women's experimentation with unconventional conjugal and sexual relationships in Tanzanian gold mining settlements, pointing out that '*women in mining settlements tend to see themselves as liberated and modern, no longer subject to male patriarchal control exerted by their rural home areas*' (Bryceson et al., 2013: 53).

Other scholars have warned, however, that there are limits to how much female inhabitants of artisanal mining towns and camps can transgress, deviate from, or change conventional gender norms. Werthmann (2009), for example, has noted that, although many women in Burkina Faso migrate to the gold mining camps in the hope of obtaining a greater degree of personal freedom and economic independence, the division of labor in these settings is largely in line with the gender ideology in the rest of Burkinabe society. Likewise, in a book chapter about the causes of small-scale gold mining conflicts in Suriname, Heemskerk and Duijves (2013: 91), have reported cases of women owning mining concessions and mining machines, but they have also drawn attention to the absence of women in the mining pits – a result of the fact that type of work is considered too physically demanding for them. A final example is Mususa's (2010) ethnographic account of how, between 2004 and 2008, many women in the Zambian Copperbelt were trying to make ends meet by artisanally digging up copper ores at so-called 'dump sites', which had been abandoned after the privatization of Zambia's national copper mining company in 1997. Mususa's analysis confirms that female participants in ASM are not immune to gender-related discrimination and oppression.

The existing research on women's involvement in ASM thus points to two important patterns. First, there is the observation that, in many mineral-rich parts of the Global South, women move to the mining areas in the hope of finding new sources of income and experiencing a higher level of freedom vis-à-vis oppressive gender rules and norms. And second, it has also been remarked that, although women working and living in artisanal and small-scale mining areas often develop several strategies to increase their room for manoeuver, they continue to experience multiple gendered forms of inequality, exclusion and marginalization. A lot has already been written about the ways in which women miners exercise agency in the complex and unstable socio-political environments of artisanal mining sites.

Far less is known, however, about the differences in agency and the power relations *between* these women. Very little research has yet been done on why some women are more successful than others in becoming integrated in what is essentially still a male-dominated industry, in dealing with the increasingly complicated regulatory and institutional landscape of ASM, and in exploiting loopholes in the system. Furthermore, there is also a lack of knowledge about the rivalry and struggle for power between 'big women' jockeying for position and competing for the same resources, and about the ways in which the hierarchical differences between women occupying different positions and playing different roles in the production process shape their everyday interaction in the workplace.

In this article, we want to address these gaps in the research by presenting a case study on women's involvement in the artisanal mining business of Kisengo, a locality situated in the Nyunzu territory of the Congolese Tanganyika province. Since 2007, Kisengo has been among the largest coltan mines in Nyunzu territory. The coltan boom has led to Kisengo's transformation from a small village into a fast-growing urban center and to the increased presence of military and non-military state institutions, all hoping to benefit from the local mineral deposits. Focusing our attention on the so-called *mamans moutrousses,* a group of women assisting the artisanal miners with the drying and cleaning of mineral ores, we will show that there are considerable differences in how women miners navigate the unstable socio-political environment of ASM in Kisengo as well as in the ways they exercise agency and power in these difficult circumstances.

The article is based on ethnographic fieldwork by the first author in Kisengo in May and June 2014. Data were collected through a combination of participant observation, in-depth interviews with leading figures in the mining community, and semi-structured interviews with in individual women working as *mamans moutrousses*.

2. Making sense of differences in female agency in artisanal mining settings

In '*The practice of everyday life*' (1984), the French cultural theorist Michel de Certeau made a distinction between "strategies" and "tactics". The former concept referred to the "*calculation of power relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an 'environment'*" (1984: xix). De Certeau, drawing on the work of von Clausewitz about war-making, argued that the powerful in society first seek to occupy and delimit a place (a territory or an institution) as their own, which they can then use as an operating base from where to control and manage other groups through a range of disciplinary techniques. It is this proper place that makes it possible to plan their own actions regardless of the circumstances, but also to foresee and anticipate on the actions of others. For their part, those who find themselves in a subordinate position do not have such an autonomous place, nor do they have the power to change or transform the conditions in which they live. This does not mean, however, that they are completely passive or that they lack any kind of maneuvering space. According to de Certeau, the "weak" can rely on the use of "tactics", which means that they can take advantage of certain situations or circumstances to create opportunities for themselves. As Isachenko has aptly summarized it, '*this art of the weak consists (….) in manipulating the space of the strong to turn circumstances into opportunities*' (Isachenko, 2012: 30).

De Certeau's ideas about the dynamics of domination and resistance bear strong similarities to those of James Scott. Instead of studying the overt, direct forms of peasant resistance against laws, taxes, development policies and various forms of exploitation in Malaysia, Scott (1985) focused on what he called "everyday forms of resistance" such as foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, gossip, and false compliance, activities which do not require a lot of planning and coordination, and which allow subordinate groups to express dissatisfaction with their working and living conditions, without having to face the often painful consequences of a direct confrontation with authority. Further elaborating on this theme, Scott (1990) also highlighted the importance of making a distinction between, on the one hand, the 'public transcript', i.e. what powerholders and subordinate groups say and do in public, and, on the other hand, the so-called 'hidden transcripts', the discourses and actions that occur offstage, in private conversations, informal gatherings and meetings, outside what Foucault has called 'the gaze of power'. By paying close attention to the discrepancies between the 'public transcript' and the 'hidden transcripts', as well as to how elements of the latter sometimes come to the surface and enter the public domain, researchers can gain a much deeper understanding of how power inequalities are experienced, interpreted, evaluated and commented on. Another reason for studying everyday forms of resistance is that they often prove to be precursors to more organized and confrontational forms of resistance such as demonstrations, riots and rebellions (Kerkvliet, 2009: 233).

While de Certeau and Scott have been praised for their efforts to highlight and make sense of how individual social actors in subordinate positions engage in various forms of everyday politics and resistance, they have also been criticized for presenting an overly simplified and reductionist picture of the dynamics of power relations. Critics have argued that it is wrong to presuppose a dichotomous antagonism between dominating and oppressed groups, to assume that power inequalities are relatively stable and also fixed in space, and to believe that there is only one dominant, coherent order in a given society.

Moreover, critics have also pointed out that, contrary to what de Certeau and Scott seem to suggest, the agency of individuals in subordinate positions should not automatically be taken to be limited to mere tactical maneuvering and the use of relatively harmless forms of everyday resistance and 'hidden transcripts'. In reality, the capacity of people in inferior positions to actually change or transform the order(s) with which they are confronted is often bigger than one would imagine (Korf et al., 2010: 388; Gal, 1995).

Vigh tried to overcome the limits of the approach of de Certeau and Scott by coining the concept of 'social navigation'. With this analytical construct, he sought to capture '*the way in which agents seek to draw and actualize their life trajectories in order to increase their social possibilities and life chances in a shifting and volatile social environment* (2006:11)'. Vigh compared the efforts of militia members in Guinea Bissau to carve out a path for themselves, despite the many uncertainties associated with living in a civil war context, with the strains of sailors trying to move their boat across troubled waters. Just like sailors need to pay attention to oncoming waves, while at the same time steering for a distant point in or beyond the horizon, the young men in Vigh's ethnography have to navigate the highly unstable and unpredictable socio-political landscape in Guinea-Buissau. While doing their best to keep afloat and to reach a self-chosen point of destination, they take into account both their current position and possibilities as well as the ones they imagine to have in the future. The concept of 'social navigation' thus allows to illuminate social agents' awareness of their present-day positions and opportunities, but also their realization that they may find themselves repositioned one day due to changing circumstances.

Adding a spatial dimension to the analysis of the agency of people living in volatile socio-political environments, Korf et al. (2010) introduced the notion of 'governable orders', which '*sediment into a specific hierarchy of rules and authoritative powers, varying at different moments in time in a given place and in different places at the same moment in time* (2010: 389–390). According to Korf et al., it makes sense to redefine Michael Watts' notion of 'governable space' as the spatial configuration of different, overlapping 'governable orders' in a specific time and place. Research first needs to explore and reveal how the orders and their underlying logics become effective in a specific place, time, and social condition. Subsequently, it is also important to look at how social actors "navigate" this complex environment.

Although the approach proposed by Korf et al. constitutes a significant step forward in the analysis of people's agency in unstable socio-political contexts, there is one thing that, in our opinion, merits more analytical attention: the gendered nature of social navigation. We believe it is important to pay attention to the fact that men and women are differently positioned towards, differently affected by, and, in certain respects, also differently responsive to the wide variety of challenges and difficulties they encounter while living and working in such contexts. Due to the existence of oppressive gender ideologies and structural gender inequalities in the division of labor and the access to resources, livelihoods, public services and positions of authority, amongst other things, women generally have a much more difficult time keeping afloat. Consequently, their navigation styles can also be expected to be (partly) gender-specific (Benya, 2016). Since women's room for manoeuver is usually much more restricted than that of their male counterparts, they are likely to draw on different repertoires of coping mechanisms and survival skills, and to use different practical and discursive strategies to achieve their goals and protect their interests (see e.g. Utas, 2005). Of course, several decades of feminist intersectional research have taught us to also pay attention to intra-gender differences (Yuval-Davis, 2006). People's design and use of navigation styles is not only shaped by gender, but also by other factors such as class, age, religion and race.

In the following sections, we will use the abovementioned insights and concepts to analyze the differences in agency between differently positioned women in Kisengo's world of artisanal mining. We will show that the 3 places where mining and mining-related activities occur - the mining sites, the town of Kisengo and the mining camps - can be considered as 'governable spaces', in which 4, partly overlapping 'governable orders' can be observed: (i) the order of chieftainship, (ii) the military order, (iii) the order of the state administration, and (iv) the order of international mining capitalism. We will explain how the configuration of 'governable orders' in the above-mentioned 'governable spaces' has changed over time, and how female participants in artisanal mining have tried to maintain a degree of control over their activities despite these changing circumstances. The analysis will further demonstrate that women's navigation styles, in other words, the ways in which they adapt to and come to grips with changes in the regulatory landscape, as well as the manner in which they engage in various forms of everyday resistance against the threat of marginalization and exclusion, are profoundly gendered. In addition to this, we will also show that some women have been more successful navigators than others. Following Honwana (2000), who has drawn inspiration from the work of de Certeau, one could argue that the less successful women in Kisengo's mining business have only been able to display 'tactic agency', while the more successful ones have succeeded in demonstrated 'strategic agency'.

3. Women navigating the changing institutional and regulatory landscape of artisanal mining in Kisengo

The northern part of Katanga, where Kisengo is located, has always been a predominantly agricultural and somewhat isolated and underdeveloped area. People living in the resource-rich southern part of Katanga sometimes mockingly refer to northern Katanga as 'useless Katanga' (*Katanga inutile*). It is estimated that more than three quarters of the population in the region secure their daily survival through agriculture and fishing, with hunting and gathering constituting complementary subsistence activities (Omasombo, 2015: 315).

Nevertheless, since 2007, mining has become increasingly important in Northern Katanga. Three quarters of available land in the province of Tanganyika[1] is currently covered by *carrés miniers*, which means that mining operators holding exploration and/or exploitation rights over these areas have the possibility of evicting the people living and working there. The rapid expansion of the mining sector has also led to a significant decline in the available labor force in the agricultural sector (Omasombo, 2015).

In Kisengo, which is part of the Nyunzu territory, the artisanal extraction and sale of coltan, a precious mineral ore which is of vital importance of electronic devices, started in March 2007. Since then, the town has acquired the reputation of being the most important coltan mining and trading center in the area. Due to the influx of large numbers of artisanal miners, the place changed from a small village into a rapidly growing urban center, a transformation that went hand in hand with the increased presence of military and non-military state institutions (Cuvelier and Bashwira, 2016: 3).

Although Kisengo's artisanal mining population has been largely made up of men, women have also been involved in a wide variety of mining and mining-related activities. In what follows, we will focus our attention on the so-called *mamans moutrousses* (or *moutrousses* in short), a group of women specialized in the reprocessing of coltan mineral tailings. After minerals have been extracted in one of Kisengo's mines, the teams of artisanal miners take them to a selling point (*point d'achat*). There, the *mamans moutrousses* light a fire, where the minerals can be dried on an iron plate, in a place called *mafiga*.[2] Women usually work in 2–3 people per *mafiga*. When dry, the minerals are cleaned: the tailings are removed and put aside by the *mamans moutrousses* for reprocessing

[1] Tanganyika is a former district of Katanga, which was split into 4 new provinces in July 2015 as part of Congo's decentralization process.

[2] *Mafiga* is the Swahili word for cooking stones (sing.: *figa*), which are used to support a pot in a traditional kitchen.

purposes. The dry minerals are handed over to the artisanal miners who can then take them to a mineral buyer for sale.[3]

Before we explain how the *moutrousses* adapted to changing mining regulations and governance arrangements, and – most importantly – how they competed for dominance between themselves, we will first give an overview of the institutional and regulatory landscape in Kisengo. As Vogel (2018) has recently shown, public authority in the context of governing ASM has become increasingly fragmented and contested between customary leaders, state and non-state armed groups, state administration and businessmen.

3.1. The coexistence of multiple governable orders in Kisengo

3.1.1. The order of chieftainship

In the early days of the coltan boom, the most important governable order that could be observed in the mining sites, the mining camp, and the center of Kisengo was that of the customary chief. The remarkably prominent role of chiefs in Congo's mining sector can be attributed to the fact that they are seen as representatives of the ancestors, with whom they are believed to entertain a privileged collaborative relationship (Smith, 2018). As (self-declared) guarantors of ancestral control over natural resources, chiefs are treated with a combination of suspicion and respect by the artisanal mining population, who believe they depend on them for personal safety and a good production.

Similarly to what can be observed in other resource-rich countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, Congolese customary authorities have displayed a strong capacity '*to mobilize the customary as a fungible political resource in order to control flows of wealth in tangible assets, territory and people*' (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2018: 19). Chiefs have been very successful in using tradition as political capital, because, historically speaking, they have always exerted a great deal of control over land and labor (see Van Acker, 2005), and also because they have managed to use their historical roles in the bureaucratic apparatus of the state to control people's access to state services. In rural, relatively isolated places like Kisengo, where the presence of the Congolese state is even weaker than elsewhere in the country, the customary chief has, for a very long time, served as the main point of contact for all state-related affairs. In April 2009, the District Commissioner of Tanganyika promoted the village chief of Kisengo to the rank of *chef de groupement*, which is the second highest rank in the Congolese administration (Iguma and Hilhorst, 2017: 90).

3.1.2. The military order

The second governable order that we have been able to identify in our research on Kisengo is the military order. During the Second Congo War, which erupted in August 1998 and pitted the late Kabila regime against its former regional allies of Rwanda and Uganda, northern Katanga was strategically very important, a fact that led to the region's gradual militarization. President Laurent-Désiré Kabila wanted to prevent the Rwandans from reaching the military base of Kamina and the Katangese capital of Lubumbashi. He also wanted to avoid becoming isolated from his home area of Manono and being cut off from the Copperbelt in the South. To prevent such a scenario from happening, orders were given to create various armed groups, which received military assistance from the Kinshasa government in the form of ammunition and light weapons. Because, after the official end of the second Congolese war, these armed groups were never fully integrated into the official security forces, the *Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo* (FARDC), they became a real threat to the population of northern Katanga from 2002 onwards (International Crisis Group, 2006: 2-4).

At the end of 2007, approximately 200 FARDC soldiers were present at the coltan mines of Northern Katanga, including mostly non-integrated elements from the 69th FARDC brigade based in Kongolo. This latter brigade was composed of both soldiers who were loyal to the government in Kinshasa and former members of the rebel movements RCD (*Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie*) and MLC (*Mouvement pour la Libération du Congo*) (de Koning, 2010: 11). In 2008, it was reported that these soldiers refused to move back to their barracks, despite calls to do so by their superiors in Lubumbashi. The reason was that they preferred to continue extorting money from artisanal miners and traders (de Koning, 2012: 239).

According to Ruben de Koning, who did fieldwork in the mining areas of Northern Katanga in 2009, the military exploitation of the mining communities took various forms, ranging from robbery at gunpoint, over the imposition of illicit fees and taxes, the creation of temporary roadblocks, and brief visits to the mines to demand cash, goods or minerals, to forms of coercive governance in the mining areas. Soldiers from the Kongolo brigade obtained the monopoly on the use of violence in and around the areas of extraction, offered protection to groups of miners, and claimed a considerable share of the production as a reward for their services (de Koning, 2010; see also Garrett et al., 2009 and, more generally about military-civilian relationships in eastern and southeastern DRC, Verweijen, 2015). At the time of fieldwork by the first author, though, these forms of harassment by the FARDC appeared to have come to an end in the Kisengo area.

3.1.3. The order of the state administration

The third governable order in Kisengo is that of the state administration. Despite the fact that Congo is often cited as a prototypical example of a weak state, state institutions have nevertheless survived, even in remote places like Kisengo. According to Englebert, this is in large part due to the fact that, despite its obvious disadvantages in terms of poor service delivery, the weakness of the Congolese state has also created a number of advantages for state elites, public servants and ordinary citizens. While members of the elite have used the weak state as an instrument of predation, using their 'parcels of state authority' to extract resources from the population, public servants have continued to attend to their daily jobs in the administration, either to safeguard their meagre salaries or to support their claims to the future payment of their salaries. For their part, ordinary citizens have accepted the persistence of state institutions because it provides them with '*a minimum level of certainty about public life, the opportunity to form relatively stable expectations about where power and resources lie, and a modicum of reduction of transaction costs as they go about their lives*' (Englebert, 2003: 9).

In the Congolese artisanal and small-scale mining sector, SAESSCAM (*Service d'Assistance et d'Encadrement du Small-Scale Mining*)[4] is one of the most important state institutions. According to its official mandate, it is expected to provide technical and financial assistance to artisanal miners. Furthermore, it is also supposed to channel production from artisanal mining operations into official channels so as to combat fraud and maximize state revenues. Practically speaking, this comprises a long list of tasks, including improving the working conditions and productivity of artisanal miners, stimulating them to comply with the Congolese mining code, encouraging the creation of mining cooperatives, participating in the establishment of credit sources for artisanal miners, monitoring mineral flows, and, finally, the collection of taxes (Geenen and Radley, 2014: 63).

There is, however, an enormous discrepancy between SAESSCAM's official mandate and the practices of its employees on the ground. In fact, all agencies and technical services within the Ministry of Mines in eastern DRC are faced with the same structural challenges. Under-

[3] Mineral buyers also make use of the services of the *mamans moutrousses* when they want to have their minerals cleaned a second time.

[4] The name of SAESSCAM has recently been changed into SAEMAP (*Service d'Assistance et d'Encadrement de l'Exploitation Minière en Petite Echelle en République Démocratique du Congo*).

resourced and under-paid, they experience great difficulties to fulfill their mandates in an appropriate manner. Not only do they often lack the logistical capacity to cover the distances between different mining sites, they also suffer from a lack of technical capacity to be able to do their work once they are there. In order to make up for this lack of means, public servants working for these services frequently resort to alternative income-generating strategies such as extortion or theft (Rothenberg and Radley, 2014: 21, cited in Vogel, 2018: 77-78).

Another important state institution in Congo's world of ASM is the *Division des Mines* (Mining Division), which holds the responsibility for inspecting mining activities at the level of the mine pits. While the geological department of the *Division des Mines* is tasked with doing geological studies, other departments take care of the administration of mineral flows, the collection of production statistics, and the authorization of mineral evacuation and export. Following the introduction of traceability mechanisms in the ASM sector as part of the international campaign against conflict minerals (see below: 3.1.4), the *Division des Mines* has also become actively involved in registering the mineral trade and tagging mineral bags at the level of the mineral depots (Diemel, 2018: 12, footnote 24).

In July 2007, both SAESSCAM and the *Division des Mines* opened a local office in Kisengo. As will become clear in the rest of the article, the two services started collecting taxes from the artisanal miners without delivering receipts. This resulted in the taxes being perceived as illegal by the artisanal mining population (Iguma and Hilhorst, 2017: 90).

3.1.4. The order of international mining capitalism

The fourth and final governable order that we distinguish in this article, the order of international mining capitalism, is closely entwined with the campaign against so-called conflict minerals. As we have explained in greater detail elsewhere (see Cuvelier et al., 2014), the illegal exploitation of minerals such as gold, diamonds, tin, tantalum and tungsten is considered as one of the principle causes of the continuation of armed conflict in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In order to break this supposedly direct link between resource extraction and violent conflict, a wide range of measures have been taken with the aim of preventing conflict minerals from entering the international markets, and increasing the transparency of the Congolese artisanal mining sector.

One of the most important measures is the International Tin Research Institute's Supply Chain Initiative (iTSCi), a traceability mechanism for tin, tantalum, and tungsten, the so-called 3 T minerals. The mechanism makes it possible to trace individual ore shipments back to their point of origin through a 'bag and tag' process with bar-coded tags serving as tracking tools. At every point in the supply chain, data are collected and introduced into the database, while audits of the iTSCi program and its participants are undertaken on an annual basis to in order to ensure transparency and reliability (Cuvelier et al., 2014: 4-5).

The implementation of traceability mechanisms such as iTSCi can be interpreted as an attempt to ward off the dangers of reputational damage for international buyers of Congolese 3 T minerals (see also Hilson et al., 2018a for a similar situation in the gold sector). At the same time, however, measures like these can also be seen as part of a process of capitalist frontier enclosure, whereby one mining site after the other is integrated into an internationally recognized system of mineral trading with limited government intervention (Vogel and Raeymaekers, 2016). The Indian company Mining Mineral Resources (MMR) has played a prominent role in expanding the capitalist frontier into the rural areas of Northern Katanga. The company was not only instrumental in kick-starting the iTSCi project in Katanga in 2011, but also offered financial assistance to allow government services in the ASM sector to continue operating. In February 2010, MMR signed a contract with the provincial branch of the national police force (PNC), committing itself to the monthly payment of a fixed amount of money to each officer of the PNC. In addition to this, MMR also stepped in when the Congolese state failed to pay the salaries of these police officers in time. At least until July 2011, it pre-financed these salaries in times of emergency. SAESSCAM also received support from MMR in the form of food and accommodation for inspectors working in 3 T mining areas controlled by MMR. The inspectors also received a "motivation premium" (*prime de motivation*) at the end of each month (Diemel and Cuvelier, 2015).

MMR worked closely together with the mining cooperative CDMC (*Coopérative des Artisanaux Miniers du Congo*), which was not a bottom-up organization representing and defending the interests of artisanal miners and mineral buyers, but a typical example of an organization initiated and led by elite members at the provincial level. Created in Lubumbashi on 10 April 2010, it was run by "big men" based in Kinshasa and in the big mining towns of Katanga (Iguma and Hilhorst, 2017).

The arrival of MMR in Kisengo was coupled with a progressive formalization of the mining process. First of all, there was a division of the mining areas into sectors, subsectors and shafts, which were controlled and managed by 2–5 *chefs de site* and *gardes de site* appointed by the mining cooperative CDMC. Second, MMR also created checkpoints that needed to be crossed by those wanting to reach the sectors. Third, the company created different categories of miners, distributing mining cards (*cartes de creuseurs*) through the CDMC. Fourth, plots of land (of 10–20 square meters) were now distributed by SAESSCAM's supervising staff (*encadreurs*). Fifth and finally, the supply chain was streamlined, with a strict division of labor and follow-up of activities at each step of the mining process (Iguma and Hilhorst, 2017: 92-93).

From the preceding account, it is clear that the institutional and regulatory landscape in Kisengo was characterized by the coexistence of 4 'governable orders': the order of chieftainship, the military order, the order of the state administration, and the order of international mining capitalism. These 4 orders could be observed in 3 'governable spaces': the town of Kisengo, the mining sites, and the mining camps, albeit with different degrees of influence on the behavior of social actors in each of these spaces. In the following sections, we will have a closer look at how female participants in artisanal mining have navigated this highly complex environment. Particular attention will be paid to the gendered navigation styles of two 'big women' in Kisengo: Dorothée and Marie-José[5] .

3.2. Gendered navigation styles

3.2.1. In the shadow of the chief

The first protagonist in the story below is Dorothée. She is the niece of the customary chief of Kisengo and was appointed by the latter as the president of the *mères-cheffes* (literally: "mother-chiefs") in 2007. In the period before the arrival of the Indian mining company MMR (cfr. supra), the *mère-cheffes* held key leadership positions in Kisengo's mining camps. Together with the male camp chiefs (*chefs de camp*), who supervised the male artisanal miners in the camp and who also belonged to the customary chief's family, the *mères-cheffes* were part of the customary governance structure in the early days of the coltan boom. Both the *chefs de camp* and the *mères-cheffes* were of vital importance for ensuring the continuing dominance of chiefly authority in Kisengo.

The mères-cheffes held several responsibilities in the mining camps. First of all, they were responsible for taking care of administrative guests and newcomers. This included cleaning their houses, bringing water for their showers and making sure they were at ease in the camp. Second, they provided counsel on all problems regarding gender issues and played a mediating role in disputes between husbands and wives in the camp. The *mère-cheffes* also managed the sex workers living and working in the camp. The latter were expected to come to them to register upon arrival, and received several things in return. Registration

[5] For security reasons, the real names of the two protagonists have been replaced by pseudonyms.

gave them security in the event of a problem (e.g. with a client or with the administration), and allowed them to become part of a kind of family. Being registered under the *mères-cheffes* made it possible for them to benefit from medical support donated by certain NGOs and sometimes from the free-of-charge distribution of condoms. The money these women earned was given to the *mères-cheffes*, who were in charge of all the expenses and needs for each woman until they decided to leave the camps.

In addition to being the president of the mères-cheffes, Dorothée acted as the manager of the *moutrousses*, listening to and trying to solve their everyday problems. In 2007, the customary chief of Kisengo instructed Dorothée to collect the customary tribute (*redevance*) among the female economic operators in town (i.e. the sex workers, traders and *moutrousses*), allowing her to keep part of the money for herself.

Of course, it was not a coincidence that Dorothée was entrusted with this particular set of responsibilities, and that she expected to play the role of a caring, welcoming and counseling mother. As Schatzberg has pointed out in a book on political legitimacy in middle Africa, women's roles in the political arena are based on an idealized conception of their roles within the family. They are supposed to complement and support male powerholders (who act and present themselves as father-figures) and to limit themselves largely to the roles of counselors and advisors (2001: 184). In line with the dominant patriarchal gender ideology in Congolese society, Dorothée's involvement in customary politics was restricted to assisting the chief in controlling the local economy and keeping an eye on female economic operators on his behalf. Still, she did exploit her limited maneuvering space to the full. Presenting herself as a real 'big woman', she developed an extensive network of reciprocal relationships with her followers, providing them with medical, emotional and financial care and expecting their loyalty in return.

3.2.2. From prima inter pares to leader of the pack

The second protagonist in our story, who would grow out to become Dorothée's principle rival, is Marie-José. Having previously worked as a trader in the mining sector, Marie-José enjoyed the status of a pioneer in the *moutrousse* community. She was among the first to do the work of *moutrousse* and initiated many others in the profession. Shortly after the arrival of MMR in Kisengo, Marie-José was contacted by the company to become the "manager" of the *moutrousses.* In that capacity, she would be responsible for collecting, bagging and tagging the minerals that women wanted to sell from the mine as part of the requirements associated with the iTSCi traceability mechanism (see 3.1.4). Similar to the way Dorothée was used by Kisengo's customary chief to safeguard and consolidate chiefly authority in the early days of the coltan boom, and to ensure women's compliance with it, Marie-José was used by MMR to facilitate the entry of a new governable order in Kisengo: the order of international mining capitalism.

It should be noted that, at the beginning of the implementation of the iTSCi program in Kisengo, the status of women in the mining process was unclear. Despite the fact that both MMR and the mining cooperative CDMC accepted mineral selling by women after the reprocessing phase, they did not yet formally recognize them as a full-fledged group of actors in the mineral supply chain. It was not until 2013, when the female head of the *Division des Mines* approached Marie-José to formalize the position of the *moutrousses*, that a solution for this problem was found, albeit a rather unconventional one. In fact, it was proposed that the *moutrousses* would be given identification cards (*cartes de creuseurs* or diggers cards) so that they would have formal access to the mining economy as diggers, despite the fact that they never engaged in any digging activities.

By 2014, when the fieldwork for this article was carried out, 35 identification cards had already been distributed among the *moutrousses*, and each of these women was hiring other women to help them, usually people who lacked the necessary money to buy cards of their own. The group of helpers were collectively known as "*sous-couverts*" (literally: women working undercover). The word '*sous-couvert*' is a generic term referring to any person helping his 'boss' by covering his/her absence. The system is based on a personal and verbal agreement between the mineral buyer and his assistant and is not supposed to be known by the cooperative, the industry or iTSCi agents. This is because it is perceived as a violation of one of the key ethical principles in contemporary extractive industries: that every single participant in the supply chain has to be officially known, registered and recognized so as to guarantee absolute transparency about the origin of the minerals and the conditions under which they have been mined.

The creative solution for the formalization of the involvement of the *mamans moutrousses* in the mineral supply chain, put forward by a female local bureaucrat, constitutes a good example of what Olivier de Sardan (2015) has called 'practical norms', that is, '*the various informal, de facto, tacit or latent norms that underlie the practices of actors which diverge from the official norms'*. On the one hand, there is a dissonance between the formal rules for ASM in the DRC and the real practices of public servants in the Kisengo branch of the Division des Mines. On the other hand, however, the practical arrangements between these 'street level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 1980) and the *moutrousses* are also evidently driven by a commitment to save the spirit of supply chain transparency under difficult conditions. Consequently, it seems appropriate to describe these 'practical norms' as 'palliative' (Olivier de Sardan, 2015). The distribution of mining cards among the *mamans moutrousses* does not appear to have been an act of resistance against the order of international mining capitalism, but rather an attempt to make the system work and to humanize bureaucratic relations.

It needs to be emphasized that the effects of this attempt to formalize the position of the *mamans moutrousses* in the mineral supply chain were not equally positive for all women involved in this activity. As already indicated above, women lacking the necessary financial resources to buy a mining card of their own were forced to become '*sous-couverts'*, in other words, the subordinates of one of the wealthier, and hence more powerful, female card-holders. What happened in Kisengo was thus in many ways similar to the process described by Fisher (2007) in her analysis of the Tanzanian artisanal mining sector in the early 2000s. Fisher notes that the integration of artisanal miners into formal institutional, regulatory and legal structures is usually seen as a positive thing, since it is assumed to strengthen these people's capacity to claim and defend their rights as well as to facilitate their access to credit opportunities. In practice, however, these efforts to integrate previously excluded and marginalized economic actors into the formal economy often tend to neglect existing power differences and social inequalities. As a result, Fisher points out, the integration efforts only benefit a small elite of relatively wealthy people, while they lead to socio-economic independence, exploitation and insecurity for others (Fisher, 2007: 735).

3.2.3. Two big women jockeying for position

The rise of Marie-José, the second 'big woman' in Kisengo's artisanal mining business, gave rise to multiple clashes with Dorothée over the control of the network of the *mamans moutrousses*. In fact, due to the frequency of contact between Marie-José and the *Division des Mines*, the importance of Marie-José's position increased, and this was perceived as a threat by Dorothée. To counterbalance Marie-José's growing position, Dorothée turned to the new chief of the Kisengo branch of SAESSCAM. She informed him that all the money was now being taken by the *Division des Mines*, to the disadvantage of SAESSCAM. To Dorothée's mind, SAESSCAM (as being concerned with the technical support of the artisanal miners) should be the department dealing with the diggers' taxes and should not let the *Division des Mines* get all of the money. In talking to SAESSCAM, Dorothée added that they could give one share of the collected tax money to the territory administrator and another share to the customary chief, in order to gain both of the latter's support.

Seeing how the situation was quickly escalating between Dorothée and Marie-José, and how it negatively affected the production of the *moutrousses* as well as the functioning of the public services (*SAESSCAM* and *Division des Mines*), the *Comité Local de Suivi* (local stakeholder consultation committee) eventually scheduled a meeting to settle the dispute[6] .

3.2.4. Tactical agency versus strategic agency

From the preceding account, it is clear that the institutional and regulatory landscape in Kisengo has been characterized by the coexistence of multiple governable orders. Moreover, due to the fact that different orders have been dominant at different places and at different points in time, the governance situation has also been very fluid. The combination of these two factors has required strong navigation skills and a high degree of adaptability on the part of the *moutrousses*. One example will suffice to illustrate this. Before the introduction of the governable order of international mining capitalism, women were allowed access to the mine, which gave them to opportunity to negotiate directly with the artisanal miners and to strike better deals with them. The reason for this was that, at that time, the order of the state administration and the order of chieftainship were still dominant in the space of the mine. Both the customary chief and members of his inner circle accepted the presence of women in the mine, and the same held true for those in charge of the local administration. As a result of the mining reforms, however, the order of international mining capitalism became dominant in the space of the mine, but also in spaces earmarked for the buying and selling of minerals. From then onwards, women were no longer granted access to these two spaces. Their room for maneuver changed rather drastically, and there were much more restrictions with regard to their participation in the commodity chain. To adapt themselves to these new circumstances, the *moutrousses* forged alliances with strategically positioned actors, responsible for overlooking and monitoring people's compliance with the rules of the order of international mining capitalism. Thanks to these alliances, the *moutrousses* found ways to circumvent the restrictions on their participation in the mining process. As a group, they have thus succeeded in maintaining a certain degree of agency and control over their working conditions, despite being confronted with constant changes in the configuration of governable orders and despite having to operate in a male-dominated environment.

That being said, it is important to emphasize that, within the group of *moutrousses*, there has been considerable variation in the extent to which individual women have managed to navigate the complexities of their living and working environment. Roughly speaking, there is a continuum, with at the one end, less successful navigators, who have only been able to engage in 'tactical agency', and, at the other end, more successful navigators, who have been able to demonstrate 'strategic agency' (see Honwana, 2000). In the first group, we find the so-called '*sous-couverts'*: women who, for a variety of reasons, have lacked the necessary financial means to become independent card-holders and who have therefore been forced to work at the service of a wealthier and better connected female colleague. The agency of these '*sous-couverts'* is best described as tactic, according to the meaning given to it by de Certeau. While '*sous-couverts'* exploit loopholes in the system and demonstrate their capacity to cope with the immediate challenges in their working and living environment (cfr. the use of artisanal mining cards to escape the restrictions on access following the entry of MMR and the formalization process), they never do so on their own initiative. The reason for this is that they do not have a power base of their own: they have no recognized position of authority in one of the governable orders, no closeness to an established leader, and no economic success that would allow them to build up financial and social capital and influence decision-making. As a result, the '*sous-couverts*' can only beat the system with the help of other, more powerful allies, who can take them under their wings.

This brings us to the other end of the spectrum: the group of 'big women' like Dorothée and Marie-José. As we have seen, Dorothée and Marie-José have both succeeded in manifesting themselves as successful navigators, because, unlike the '*sous-couverts'*, they do have their own power base. While Dorothée has been able to capitalize on her closeness to the customary chief and her official position in the customary governance structure, Marie-José has managed to draw advantage from her economic success, her status as a pioneer within the *moutrousse* community, and her closeness to MMR and the *Division des Mines*. In a remarkable display of 'strategic agency', Dorothée and Marie-José have demonstrated their ability to assess the long-term consequences of their actions by concluding partnerships with male powerholders and taking advantage of the competition between different state services in Kisengo's artisanal mining sector.

4. Conclusions

The aim of this article was to examine differences in agency and power between women involved in artisanal mining activities in the DRC. Through a case study on the *mamans moutrousses* in Kisengo, a mining boomtown situated in the Congolese Tanganyika province, we wanted to contribute to a better understanding of how and why some women are more successful than others in navigating the complex - and constantly changing - institutional and regulatory environments of artisanal mining settings. Our analysis has shown that, in order to make sense of how people living and working in unstable socio-political contexts try to maintain a certain degree of control over their lives, it is helpful to combine Vigh's navigation theory with a spatial approach inspired by the insights of Watts (2004) and Korf et al. (2010). The use of this theoretical framework has allowed us to draw attention to the coexistence of multiple governable orders in artisanal mining areas, as well as to the need to distinguish between different governable spaces in these areas. Moreover, the framework has also made it possible to highlight the changing nature of the spatial configuration of governable orders, and to produce a more fine-grained analysis of how individual actors adapt and respond to such changes.

A second general finding of our study is that the navigation styles of people operating in Congolese artisanal mining settings are gendered. Of course, there are similarities between the navigation styles of women miners and those of men. Apart from the fact that members of both groups are known to enter into clientelistic relationships with the aim of enjoying protection and support from their patrons, they both conclude alliances with powerful, influential actors in order to be able to circumvent or violate certain rules, and to work out what Olivier de Sardan (2015) has referred to as 'practical norms' (Geenen, 2015), and they both capitalize on the rivalry between different state services and the lack of clarity about their respective areas of competence (Diemel, 2018). Nevertheless, there are also significant differences. First of all, the *moutrousses* have used different 'repertoires of contention' (Tilly, 1986; Tarrow, 1993), i.e. different ways of making claims on decision-makers. In their struggle to be included in the formalization of 3 T mining, they have relied mainly on informal lobbying, thus refraining from voicing their claims and demands publicly through petitions, protest marches and other more visible strategies of claim-making, which are more frequently used by male participants in ASM activities (Iguma and Hilhorst, 2017). Second, women's navigation styles have been shaped by gendered solidarity. Despite being rivals, both Dorothée and Marie-José have both made efforts to secure the continuation of the activities of the *moutrousses* and to shield them from male interference. While the *moutrousses* have been obliged to adapt and subject themselves to the order of chieftainship, for instance, their interactions with this order have been mediated by the figure of the *mère-cheffe*,

[6] The CLS is a local committee comprising a representative of the Ministry of Mines at the local level, as well as representatives from the artisanal miners, the mineral traders, the local authorities, and the legitimate security actors. The official aim of this committee is to make sure that international due diligence requirements are met and that the economic performance of the mining sector is improved.

who has acted as a kind of go-between or broker with the men forming the inner circle of the customary chief. Acting in accordance with local norms concerning the relationship between gender and power, the *mère-cheffe* has played the role of a caring mother, who, on the one hand, has helped to implement the rules of the father-chief, but, on the other hand, has also made sure to protect her "children" from certain forms of abuse and exploitation, and who has supported them financially and emotionally in times of need. Likewise, Marie-José has used her contacts with the *Division des Mines* to work out a practical solution for the formalization of the involvement of the *moutrousses* in the mineral supply chain.

Our third general finding is that there are considerable differences between women miners as for the capacity to navigate the complex and unstable socio-political environments of artisanal mining settings. We have shown that there is a continuum with, on the one hand, successful navigators like Dorothée and Marie-José who have the capacity to demonstrate 'strategic agency' thanks to their social, symbolic and financial capital, and on the other hand, less successful navigators who are only able to engage in 'tactic agency' due to the fact that they lack the necessary financial means and connections to be able to take their fate into their own hands.

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